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ABSTRACT

A 3-month pilot study conducted from April-June 1979 with 16 major informants provides information for constructing a preliminary model of female life in Mauritania. An introduction gives definitions for terms used differently in Mauritania (tribe, ethnic group, and class) and discusses examples of each. The study (based mainly on repeated interviews plus some group discussions) examines all aspects of female life in Mauritania, including life cycle, occupations, economic roles and decision-making powers of women, attitudes and values towards themselves and their families, and the role they play in Mauritanian society. Information from 16 women (9 Bidans, 2 Toucouleur, 1 Bidan/Toucouleur, 3 Haratin) reveals a pattern of rural background, entry into the urban labor force as artisans or market sellers, little formal education (except Koranic), emerging but limited decision-making powers, and a desire for daughters and granddaughters to have a better way of life through education. The study suggests that economic changes brought about by prolonged drought are bringing social change, such as a decrease in forced feeding ("gavage"). The study points out that while Mauritanian women are considered among the most independent of traditional Muslim women, they still face problems associated with high divorce rate, polygamy, and lack of decision-making power at governmental levels. (BRR)

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A STUDY OF FEMALE LIFE IN MAURITANIA

by

Barbara Abeille

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
INTRODUCTION - Part I, by John Grayzel	v
INTRODUCTION - Part II, by Barbara Abeille	xiii
A. Background and Purpose	xiii
B. Sample and Method	xiii
1. Ethnic Status	xiv
2. Social Status	xiv
3. Economic Status	xiv
4. Educational Status	xiv
5. Residence Patterns	xv
Table I - Breakdown of Informants	xvi
C. Geographic Setting	xv
I. LIFE CYCLE	
A. Childhood	1
B. Education	2
1. Informal Education	2
2. Koranic Education	5
3. "Ecole Francaise"	6
C. Marriage	8
D. Motherhood	13
E. Divorce	15
F. Old Age	18
II. OCCUPATION	20
A. Woman Selling Jewelry	23
B. Woman Selling Voiles (the Attire of the Bidan)	24
C. Growing and Selling Vegetables	25
D. Leather Workers	26
E. Fabric Dyer	27
F. Couscous Maker	28
III. ECONOMIC ROLE	30

IV. DECISION MAKING POWERS 34

A. Family Level 34
B. Work Level 36
C. National Level 36

V. ATTITUDES AND VALUES 37

A. Husbands and Men in General 37
B. Daughters 38
C. Education 42
D. Forced Feeding ("Gavage") 44
E. Polygamy 48
F. Women's Role in Mauritania 49

SOME STANDARD QUESTIONS ASKED OF ALL THE INFORMANTS

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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v

INTRODUCTION

to

A STUDY OF FEMALE LIFE IN MAURITANIA

Barbara Abeille's study revolves around the expressed opinions of her various informants. However, just as sound per se cannot travel through a vacuum, so too opinions exist largely as reverberations travelling through a particular socio-cultural milieu. To really understand the quality of those opinions requires some understanding of that basic medium through which they are passing.

Mauritania's socio-cultural situation which forms the background for this study often strikes outsiders as unusually complex and difficult to understand. It certainly is different from that to which most westerners are acculturated and in that aspect provides a refreshing opportunity to wash clean ones heads of numerous ethnocentric stereotypes. Unfortunately it is these stereotypes that can also block ones understanding of it. This is especially true of three crucial concepts: tribe, ethnic group, and class. These three terms are continuously confused and the term "tribe" totally misused. A tribe is a political unit. This unit may claim descent from a common ancestor or not. Its members may belong to the same ethnic group or class or not. What is important is that they recognize

belonging to a unit which exists based on some present or past common interest in exerting power either to obtain or protect themselves or their resources. Tribes are concrete entities made up of member individuals who can "gather", "appoint" leaders, make war, etc. People can be admitted to or thrown out of a tribe.

An ethnic group is a somewhat more abstract entity than a tribe. It exists based on a feeling of shared identity on the part of people who possess a common life style, language, religion, or other major cultural institution. One belongs to an ethnic group because both the individual and others "feel" they belong. A person is neither "admitted" nor "thrown-out" of an ethnic group, and in fact people of the same ethnic group may often deny the legitimacy of each other's claimed identity. There is no inherent political basis to ethnic identity though political units can manipulate ethnic differences for such purposes. However members of the same ethnic group need not be allies and in fact may have always been enemies.

Class is a still more abstract concept than ethnic group. People are members of the same "class" when someone "classifies" them together based on some common trait. While people may see themselves as members of a certain class this is not a pre-requisite for ascribing membership. Someone can be classified as a member of the working class based on the job he does even if he believes he is a direct descendent of the King of England

and entitled to being considered royalty.

To understand Mauritanian society one must understand its ethnic groups, socio-economic classes and tribes.

The major ethnic groups and their classes are as follows:

The Hassaniya speakers who predominate over the majority of the country except along the river are divisible into two crucial sub-groups - the Bidan or white Maures and the Haratin or black Maures. The Bidan (white Maures) are traditionally further divided into Zwaya (religious or "marabout" groups), Hassan (warrior groups), Zenaga (free tributary groups), Mu'allamin (craftsmen) and Ighyuwn (entertainers). Besides the traditional occupation by which these sub-groups are identified, they generally involve themselves in other commercial trading or livestock raising, or both.

The Haratin (black Maures) are commonly referred to as "freed slaves", (in contrast to the term "Abid" which means a captured slave). They are viewed as the descendents of former black slaves, originally taken from along the river, Mali or Senegal. Some live as an integral part of a larger Bidan encampment, others have their own encampments and work as herders, or are settled in Haratin agricultural communities.

The Toucouleur are the agricultural populations who dominate both sides of the Senegal River, where, in the centuries prior to colonial domination, they lived under a highly stratified

theocracy. While the traditional division of their society into free men (Rimbe), artisans (Nyenybe) and captives (Maccube) still has meaning in terms of an individual social status, it no longer dictates either actual occupation or their actual power relationships between different sub-groups and particular individuals.

The Peul are cattle pastoralists (though many now also cultivate) closely related in language and social structure to the Toucouleur.

The Wolof are the single largest ethnic group in Senegal. While they too had a traditional stratified class society, its traditional divisions are largely meaningless today. This is especially true among the basically expatriate communities found in Mauritania near the border region around Rosso.

Both the Bambara and the Sarakolle are ethnic groups without established communities in the Sixth Region. Concentrations of Sarakolle populations begin around the Guidimakha Region; the Bambara population is found mainly in southeastern Mauritania (along the Malian border). Both groups have very strong traditions stressing the welfare of the community over the individual and have established mechanisms for mobilizing people to work together.

Of all these groups only the Hassaniya speaking Bidans and Haratins have tribes. The Toucouleur, Peul, Wolof, Bambara and Sarakolle are not tribes nor do they belong to tribes. They

are united in extended family groups of different sizes and cohesion.

Hassaniya culture has traditionally been an essentially nomadic society save for a few central market, resting, or religious centers, generally in the oases areas. Most of the relationships that unite people are therefore more social than residential since residential patterns are so fluid. To the extent that geographic identity is important, it usually occurs on the level of regional identities that express themselves when people find themselves third-party strangers (i.e. in Nouakchott, people often see a unity among those from Trarza, as opposed to others from Tagant, or Adrar; this phenomenon being somewhat both expressed and catered to by the new GIRM decision to denote administrative regions by their traditional names.).

The social cement that unites people extends across regions. Basically a Bidan (white Maure) belongs to one of a large number of tribes or clans (Qabila) whose members theoretically descend from a common ancester. These, however, generally are large and ancient to the point of having little meaning in terms of the management of everyday life. As a result they break down into smaller factions called (Fakhdh) or "fractions". In theory, members of the same Fakhdh also descend from a common descendent of the original founder of the Qabila. In reality, however,

membership in both a Qabila and Fakhdh can change and are as much an alliance of people of similar social status as they are actual kin groups. Moreover it is usually the Fakhdh that is the actual functioning alliance and in fact members of different Fakhdh of the same Qabila may be actually allied against each other. The Fakhdh themselves are composed of patrilineal extended familes (father and sons) called Ahel and which are the most fundamentally important kin units, especially since divorce is quite frequent in many areas and the nuclear family of husband, wife and children is therefore unstable.

In the rural areas the basic living unit is the Khayma or tent, which generally is synonymous with the nuclear family. The Frig is the encampment of which three different categories are generally recognized: (a) small Frig from 1 - 15 tents, generally referred to as a Khyam: (b) Frig of 10 - 20 tents called Nazla; and (c) very large encampments, called Massa. The Massa where the chief of the Qabila has his tent, is referred to as Helle or El Kariya (the tribal center). Such a settlement may be divided into sections or "neighborhoods" referred to as Halagaiz, Halgay or Halagai (circles).

The situations existent among the other ethnic groups are quite different. The Toucouleur and Wolof live in settled communities along the river which are not only permanent but in some cases quite ancient. Such settlements are often characterized

by substantial investments in both personnel and community physical infrastructure (houses and mosques) and depending on size are further divisible into neighborhoods (quartiers) and family concessions. The same is true of the Sarakolle and Bambara except that these communities are usually inland and more cohesive than those of the Toucouleur and Wolof. The Peul (Fulbe) tehd to live in smaller hamlets (waro) usually composed of straw huts sometimes surrounded by flimsy fences. Sometimes these are occupied seasonally if the whole family travels with the herd. Other times only specific herders (e.g. teenage boys) will leave with the animals while the others stay home. The pattern is generally referred to as Transhumance - having fixed home locations but with substantial seasonal movement of at least some members of the household. However these fixed locations are neither as permanent nor do they function as an interdependent community as do Toucouleur and Wolof communities.

Of course today the situation is rapidly changing. In the last ten years the country's population has gone from being 2/3's nomad, 1/3 sedentary to exactly the opposite (1/3 nomad, 2/3 sedentary). However, the change has been so recent that, generally speaking, Mauritania does not possess the type of well established urban population, found in many other African countries, whose values and ties are now well divorced from that of the

rural population. Most urban dwellers, from the head of state to the unemployed squatter, are still closely tied to rural values and specific rural communities.

While change is occurring in regards to ethnic, tribal and class identity, the old categories are still operative, applicable, and crucial for understanding the country's present socio-economic situation. A brief description such as this cannot do justice to either the complexity of the subject or the reader who wishes to acquire a profound knowledge of the culture. It is hoped, however, that it will provide what is necessary to understanding the basic milieu from which Barbara Abeille's informants come and to which they refer when expressing their feelings.

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INTRODUCTION - Part II.

A. Background and Purpose

This report summarizes the results of a 3 month study carried out in order to construct a preliminary model of female life in Mauritania.

The purpose of this study was to examine in detail all aspects of female life in Mauritania, including the life cycle, occupations, economic roles and decision-making powers of women and their attitudes and values towards themselves and their families and the roles they play in Mauritanian society.

B. Sample and Method

The results of the pilot research are based mainly upon repeated interviews with fifteen informants plus some group discussions. When the informants spoke no French, a local interpreter was used. Many of the interviews were carried out in a group setting, with other people present and often contributing to the interview. Many times this was impossible to avoid considering the number of children and adults that are continually passing through an average Mauritanian home/tent.

The informants and their social status, for purposes of a shorthand identification in each quote, have been given a number, corresponding to Table 1, along with the following abbreviation:

UB - Upper Class Bidan
MB - Middle Class Bidan
LB - Lower Class Bidan
H - Haratin
T - Toucouleur
A - Abid Servant

Ethnic Status: Of the sixteen major informants, nine were Bidans, two were Toucouleur, one was mixed Bidan/Toucouleur and three were Haratin.

Social Status: Five of the respondents were of the noble class, three were commoners, and four were artisans. Among the Tributaries interviewed, one was a freed slave and two were still attached to their masters.

Economic Status: Seven of the respondents were in the lower economic class, four in the middle and four in the high. The wealthiest informant, for example, spent approximately 80,000 UM (around $1777) per month on family, household and miscellaneous expenses. Others in this economic status had a house with several rooms, at least one vehicle and various conveniences such as a frigidaire and a stove. Middle class includes informants with a house of several rooms or an encampment with approximately 10 tents. They can spend anywhere from 10,000 UM - 30,000 UM ($200-$700) per month. Lower class extends from informants with one room and/or one tent who spend 100 - 200 UM ($2 - $5) per day to the super poor whose tent is in tatters and with 2000 UM ($44) or less a month to spend.

Educational Status: All but three of the respondents had either a traditional Koranic education or none at all. Some

of them had been taught to read and write Arabic, while others had been taught the barest essentials of the Koran in order to pray. Only three of the respondents had been to the French School, two of them had gone to some school of higher learning.

Residence Patterns: Of the fifteen informants, thirteen lived in or around Nouakchott and three in Boutilimit, a village 150 kilometers east of Nouakchott. Of the thirteen in the Nouakchott area, four can be considered as rural inhabitants in that they either lived in a rural setting near Nouakchott or else had come to Nouakchott from a rural environment within the past six months.

All of the interviews were carried out during the months of April, May and June 1979.

C. Geographic Setting: Mauritania's capital city, Nouakchott, in itself, did not exist before the independence of the country in 1960. There has been a steady influx of people coming to the capital since that time, although the largest, most recent and very rapid growth of the city has been due to the drought that affected the country to varying degrees since the late sixties.

This is important to this study because the majority of women interviewed were born "en brousse" or in the interior of the country, either in a village or in an encampment and only came to Nouakchott much later in their lives, either with their

TABLE 1 BREAKDOWN OF INFORMANTS

Number	Ethnic Status1	Social Status	Economic Status	Educational Status	Present Occupation	Residence Pattern	Marital Status
1.	Bidan	commoner	low	Koranic	sells jewelry	urban	divorced
2.	Bidan	noble	high	Koranic	sells voiles	urban	married
3.	A group discussion in which all ethnic, social, age, economic, educational and marital statuses were represented.						
4.	Bidan	artisan	middle	Koranic	leatherwork	urban	married
5.	Bidan	noble	high	Mixed*	housewife	urban	married
6.	Bidan	noble	high	Mixed*	cadre	urban	single
7.	Toucouleur	commoner	middle	Mixed*	cadre	urban	married
8.	Bidan/ Toucouleur	commoner	low	Koranic	sews & knits	rural	married
9.	Bidan	noble	middle	Koranic	housewife	rural	married
10.	Bidan	artisan	low	Koranic	makes carpets	rural	married
11.	Naratin	freed slave	low	Koranic	sells vegetables	urban	married
12.	Toucouleur	artisan	middle	Koranic	dyes fabric	urban	married
13.	Abid	attached	low	none	sells couscous	urban	married
14.	Bidan	artisan	low	none	leatherwork	urban	divorced
15.	Abid	attached slave	low	none	servant	rural	married
16.	Bidan	noble	high	Koranic	none	rural	divorced

*Mixed = Koranic and French

parents, their husbands or alone with their children if they were divorced. Moreover, most of the people coming to Nouakchott because of the drought were obliged to acquire new skills or jobs, many for the first time. This was especially true of the typical "Bidan", or White Moor, who often led a relatively easy existence en brousse before the drought; the majority of them having had servants or slaves.

Since these migrations have taken place so recently, there really has not been enough time for habits and customs to form representative of a specifically urban mode of behaviour.

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I. LIFE CYCLE

A. Childhood

Childhood for the majority of young girls in Mauritania tends to follow a consistent pattern. Whether they are White Moor or Black Moor, Toucouleur or Wolof, childhood for young girls is generally free of responsibility and is normally spent with the extended family in a concession, as with the Toucouleur of the South, or with the many cousins and relatives living in the same encampment for the White Moors.

For the Bidan, childhood is normally spent within the encampment and very close to the family though not necessarily with a mother or father as care is often entrusted to a grandmother or to other relatives. A young Mauritanian girl first practices those duties required of her when she is married and taking care of her own family, such as the care and upkeep of the tent, the making of mats, how to fold and move the tent and how to choose a new site for the encampment. She learns these activities around 7 or 8 years of age, often from toys such as miniature tents and camel saddles; however, it is not until 12 years of age that she actively participates in these activities. During this time, she also learns how to command and supervise the servants working for her, the number of which depends on the wealth and power of her family.

The Toucouleur and the Wolof, in the south also start

teaching their daughters the ways of housekeeping around 8 years of age. The young girl helps her mother with the housework, the cooking and in looking after her siblings or cousins.

The children of slaves are the only ones that do any real work. While they can be asked to do things by any member of their master's family, their duties do correspond with their age, fetching things when very young and graduating to heavier tasks when older. At other times they may be seen playing with the other children of the encampment, servants and masters alike.

An artisan will spend her childhood observing and learning her future trade from her mother. In addition, she learns the traditional activities of other young Bidan girls. When living in the interior, it would appear that the young Bidans are only required to actually work and assist the family when they change their encampment.

> "In the desert, work is when you move. That day you help pack the baggage and prepare the tent" (14 - LB)

B. Education

1. Informal Education:

Informal education tends to be standard for Mauritanian girls, regardless of their ethnic affiliation. Variations seem to be due to family finances, and to individual personalities and circumstances rather than accepted mores.

From their mothers, they learn the essentials of everyday

life - how to dress, the cleaning and upkeep of the house/tent, cooking, how to take care of children and so forth. In addition, mothers teach their children social manners including how to pray and be a good Muslim.

> "She taught me how to cook, to be clean, to be nice with people, to respect people, to feed strangers, to smile, to take care of children and to be polite in front of people." (8 - LB)
>
> "...how to greet people, pray, respect people, cook..." (12 - T)
>
> "From my mother, I learned social behavior, how to keep house, and she prepared me to be a mother." (3 - Group)
>
> "My mother taught me how to make the cushions mats, how to pray and do the housekeeping." (14 - LB)

Generally speaking, the social and moral education is the responsibility of both parents, however, often the fathers are working elsewhere, whereas the mother's presence under the tent and in the home is more assured.

> "The verbal education, moral and spiritual, comes from the mother." (1 - LB)
>
> "They both taught values - not to go out with men." (7 - T)

The father's role in the education of their daughters is more difficult to determine in this small study and is definitely an area requiring further attention. It does appear that traditionally the fathers do have some responsibility for the cultural education of their daughters and this includes her Koranic education. For the most part, the fathers pay for a

"Marabout" or religious man or woman to come to their tent/home to teach the Koran and Muslim law. The fathers may also participate in this education themselves.

> "In the desert, when the parents are not divorced, men can take part themselves, or with money, in the education of their children." (1 - LB)
>
> "The father teaches the Koran. Cultural education is the father and social is the mother." (3 - Group)

While the daughter's moral and social education often falls more heavily in the mother's lap since she is with her daughter more frequently, and since so many parents are divorced and separated, in a couple of cases, the informants said that their social education was left up to their fathers, as their mothers were more concerned and occupied with the daughter's forced feeding ("gavage", see section V-D.).

> "My father taught the spoken language and a good education like the social greetings. He also brought an instructor home for courses" (7 - T)
>
> "He defined the big issues, when I should be in, certain questions of Muslim law. My mother was satisfied that I drank the milk (to become fat)." (1 - LB)

In at least three cases, the father was the one to insist upon a formal education for their daughters and he assumed the role of provider and supervisor of this education.

> "From my father, I also received a moral education. He pushed me to study and to go to school. He decided that all his children should go to school." (12 - T - daughter)

"He supervises the children, he questions their teacher, he hires a tutor for the Koran, Arabic and French." (7 - T)

2. Koranic Education:

Children in Mauritania, both girls and boys, begin receiving their Koranic education at 7 years of age. This education is considered essential for a Muslim, as in order to pray "you must know the Koran".

Whether living en brousse in an encampment or in a village and regardless of ethnic identity, all children receive some form of Koranic instruction. This generally includes learning to read and write Arabic, grammar, Muslim law and the life of the prophet Mohammed. However, in certain areas of Mauritania, such as the Hodh to the east, there is a tendency to teach only the boys to learn to read and write Arabic and the girls are taught only enough to permit them to pray. In the region of Nouakchott and Boutilimit, all of the girls learn to read and write Arabic along with the boys.

Since Koranic education is often privately financed, unless the father or mother take this task upon themselves, the length and degree of study largely depends upon the financial resources of the family.

Perhaps the only exceptions to these generalizations would apply to the children of slaves. While many of them also receive minimal Koranic instruction, it is dependent upon the "largesse" of their master. In one of the encampments visited

in the course of this study, a school existed for all the children of the encampment, including the slave's children but their inclusion only dated from this year.

> "Everyone is in it - all the children. This year is the first time the slaves are in it." (9 - UB)

3. "Ecole Francaise":

It is when considering the French School that problems arise for the young Mauritanian girl.

Traditionally, the French School was called just that because it was started by the French colonialists, it was based on the French system of education and French was the primary language learned. In the past few years, however, there has been a movement towards Arabization, and while the educational system is still largely French curriculum Arabic as a language has taken precedence over French.

It is only a small minority of Mauritanian girls who are able to go to school and the reasons for this are many. Since the objective for Mauritanian girls is marriage and family, school is often considered unnecessary. Some people interpret the Koran as being against education for women altogether, although this tends to be used as a convenient rationale when parents do not want their girls to leave the confines of the tent/home in order to go to school.

> "The daughter of a bourgeoise family should stay home and learn the Koran." (5 - UB)

In the past, the Bidan girl of 8 or 9 years old was too busy being fattened up, by being force fed, to go to school.

> "One cannot force feed and also send their daughters to school." (2 - UB)

Furthermore, the Bidan girl often lived in the desert, far from a village where there was a school and it was unthinkable that the parents would send her to the village just to go to school. This problem was recognized by the past government of Moktar ould Daddah, and efforts were made to

a) create more schools in the interior of the country and

b) encourage parents to send their daughters to school.*

As regards financial considerations, while education is free, books and supplies are not. This reason may be more among the blacks of the southern villages. Since in general it appears that they are less reluctant than the Bidans to send their daughters to school.

For the most part, if a young girl does go to school, she continues until the "CM2" (just before junior high school). That is the age, 12-14 years old that the girls are considered

a) of marriageable age and

b) safer in the home under the eyes of the parents.

> "They don't let the girls out. They'll meet men. There were some girls in the lycee who became pregnant. Parents are so afraid of what their daughters will do when they go out of the house." (5 - UB)

*c.f. Turkia Daddah, "Quelques remarques sur la promotion de la femme", 1974.

"Her father took her out after two years because he said that school spoiled the girls." (9 - MB)

"The girls of the village go to school but when they reach the end of elementary school, around 14 years old, they pull out the girls." (7 - T)

Yet, the importance of school for girls is rapidly changing and the number finishing lycee (high school) and receiving their Baccalaureates is increasing yearly. More classrooms are being built every year all over the country. Parents are also changing their ideas. All of the respondents involved in this study stated a preference that their daughters continue their education before getting married.

Attitudes towards education for women will be discussed further in Section V. - C. of this report.

C. Marriage

Marriage in Mauritanian society is considered as the ultimate goal for every young girl. Her childhood training is with two things in mind - marriage and motherhood. For the women in Mauritania, marriage is their only choice, very rarely do they have any other alternative. An unmarried girl is almost a family disgrace and definitely the object of much discussion and doubt about her ability to attract men. It is almost impossible for the people of Mauritania to accept that a girl may prefer to wait a while before marrying.

Marriage is also the only acceptable way that a girl can have any physical contact at all with a man. She is generally far too afraid not to be a virgin at her marriage or risk having an illegitimate child to have sexual relations before marriage or even be in private with a man.

On the other hand, marriage itself is taken rather lightly by Mauritanian men, especially Bidans. For them it appears that marriage is essentially the means by which they can sleep with a girl. The men can marry easily and divorce their wives even more easily, and without any fear of legal penalties.

Traditionally, one could say that Mauritanian girls were considered as chattel or property by their families. They were fattened up (by being force fed from around the age of 6 or 8 years old)and then they were married off at a very young age (anywhere from 8 years to 15 years old) without being consulted in the choice of a husband.

> "Her mother is against girls who go to school. She wants her daughters to be force fed and take a husband very early. The daughter is then more interesting, prettier and more favored. The girl who finds a husband at 10 years of age - one says that she is an excellent daughter." (9 - MB)

> "I was married at 8 years of age. I spent 7 years (the first married 7 years) with my family and was taken to my husband at night. But the first 2 years of the marriage were without touching." (2 - UB)

> "I was 13 years old for my first marriage." (5 - UB)

Among the Bidans, marriage is often an ostentatious and costly affair.* The prospective groom pays a sum of money and/or gifts to the bride's parents, the amount of which depends upon his wealth and the attraction and socio-economic status of the bride. The sums given can vary anywhere from a few hundred dollars to thousands of dollars plus additional thousands in gifts. (For example, one man paid his in-laws $2000 plus 30 voiles worth $50 each, 30 men's robes worth about $70 each, and 30 pairs of shoes.) Marrying off one's daughter can be a money-making proposition, and as a result, the motive behind such marriages is often pure profit on the part of the parents who consider their daughters as merchandise to be force fed and sold to the profit of the family.

Marriages are arranged between families and the ideal choice for a young Bidan or Toucouleur Mauritanian is a cousin from the same tribe. The choice is left up to the girl's father, although the head or older member of the tribe is often consulted.

> "My fiancee's father made the arrangements because he was older than my father and my father could say nothing." (5 - UB)

The girl's mother may participate in the choosing, but this tends to be one domaine that rests in the hands of the male head-of-household.

*c.f. CHAAB No. 65, 14 September 1975, p. 3.

"Even if the mother doesn't accept, she has to accept because the father commands the daughter." (9 - MB)

Although one is told that the Koran does not oblige a girl to marry and many say that she can refuse, it is very doubtful that many girls refused in the past. Now it is possible to find a very few who feel independent and confident enough to refuse their parent's choice, but on the whole, the girls still feel too much pressure from family to refuse.

"My parents have proposed 10 men already. I don't accept." (3 - Group)

"My parents chose. I cannot refuse. If I had said no, it would be an insult to my parents." (7 - T)

"I married in a time when the women did not choose husbands and if she was lucky, her parents chose someone she liked." (2 - UB)

Even a highly educated respondent felt obliged to accept her parents choice.

"I am not free to marry someone I want. I cannot marry someone who is not suitable socially, the same tribe, etc." (6 - UB)

Essentially, Mauritanian girls rarely had the chance to meet someone, except for the other children/relatives in the encampment or concession.

"In an important family, men don't come to see the girls. There is no occasion to meet men." (5 - UB)

Now that more young girls go to school, they have more opportunity; however, they can still never bring someone home

for their parents to meet.

"I cannot bring someone home." (6 - UB)

They cannot talk about matters of sex and marriage in front of their parents, especially never directly with their fathers. Everything of this nature must be discussed through a third person.

> "My father waits until someone comes to see him and then he sends someone to ask me. Sex is taboo. Marriage is taboo. You must always talk to parents about those subjects through a third person." (6 - UB)

It is not until a girl has divorced and is considering her second or third marriage that she can hope to exercise her rights and voice an opinion.

> "With Muslims, for the second marriage, she has the right to say yes or no. If she refuses, she does not have to marry." (2 - UB)

These practices vary little between the groups. None of the black ethnic groups are force fed, but they are still married at an early age. Attached slaves may have a nominally larger role in the choice of their husbands, but the final decision and accord lies with the master rather than the parents.

> "She was married here, in the bosom of the family. Her husband asked her master. The parents were informed, but the master gave his agreement first." (15 - A)

Almost all of the women involved in this study who had daughters of their own, said they wanted their daughters to

finish their school and marry at an older age than they themselves had married. They also gave the impression that their daughters would have a greater say so in the choice of partner.

> "I would not accept it if my daughter wanted to marry - only if she has finished her studies. She shouldn't marry before becoming 22 years old or more - a mature age." (7 - T)
>
> "I want to give her freedom. I want her to continue school, like she wants and to marry around 18 years old." (5 - UB)

One woman even preferred that her daughter not remarry, but she recognized the security that marriage ideally presents, even though it is in reality a false sense of security.

> "I hope my daughter will remarry because there is not brother to take care of her. If she was with her father, or a brother, I wouldn't hope that she remarries." (1 - LB)

As we will see there is a continuous contradiction between the old and still important practice of early marriage and a new expressed acknowledgement of the importance of education.

D. Motherhood

For most Mauritanian women, early motherhood tends to be relatively easy, especially when compared with the young mothers of the industrialized societies. Family life of most groups means having enough servants and/or relatives living in very close proximity to help take care of the children.

All Mauritanians profess love of children. There is, however, an interesting custom which exists among the Bidans. Traditionally, women are not supposed to express any sentiment in front of others. Bidan mothers cannot touch their children or display affection to them in front of their parents or an older person. This is said to be out of respect for the older person. Even if a Bidan mother saw that her child was in danger, was going to touch the hot tea pot for example, she would be obliged to tell her mother (or whomever was with her and was older) so that she could stop the child. In reality this code is often relaxed in front of one's mother, but it is rigidly adhered to in front of fathers and/or older men.

> "I cannot speak with or caresse my oldest daughter in front of people older than myself. It is a respect." (9 - MB)
>
> "I cannot embrace my daughter in front of my father." (8 - LB)

Most of the mothers objected somewhat to this habit and felt they had followed it less rigidly with their second and third children. None of them felt that they would require the same behaviour of their own daughter towards their grandchildren, although they could not guarantee any change in front of male members of the family.

> "My children will be able to embrace their children before me, but not in front of my brother or husband." (9 - MB)

E. Divorce

Divorce in Mauritania is seen as excessive and abusive by women. It is easily and quickly carried out by men and it is the one practice which more than any other continues to totally supress women and impede any progress in their development.

Because of the importance of this issue, a preliminary qualification seems called for in that it is the female perspective given here and very often men express a contradictory opinion that females initiate the divorce. The reality of the situation is associated to class standing, with upper class Bidans able to manipulate their situation vis a vis men and lower class being more at the mercy of men. This hypothesis is in need of much further testing.

The rate of divorce is extremely high in Mauritania and nearly every Bidan has been married at least once. One man known to the writer was with his 30th wife at last meeting. Divorce is highest among the Bidans and very low among the black ethnic groups of the south - who have a much greater percentage of polygamous marriages than the Bidans.

Divorce carries none of the negative connotations per se associated with it in western societies. However, Mauritanian women express bitterness and anger when discussing divorce; at the same time they recognize the futility of complaining, as they are totally dependent upon the marriage state for their sense of security.

The classic situation is the young Bidan daughter married at a young age and then divorced several years and several children later. She is essentially abandoned and she must return to her family for financial and emotional support. She has no training and no skills and is totally dependent upon her family. It is only the very few and the very rich who are given a house or some sort of settlement when divorced.

> "The parents had only one burden and t hen their daughter comes back with 4 children and they then have 5 burdens." (2 - UB)

> "Husbands don't give money. They just abandon you." (1 - LB)

Some women, of course, may be the one seeking the divorce. She may go to the Muslim judge, although it is the husband who must consent, whereas when the situation is reversed, the wife has no option.

> "She asks, but it's the husband that says yes or no." (5 - UB)

It appears that among the Bidans, the women keep the children when they are divorced. However, among the Toucouleur and Wolofs the man normally assumes responsibility for his children, either by keeping them with him and his new or second wife in a polygamous marriage or by sending them to his mother. One could hypothesize on the basis of this very small study that one of the reasons why there are fewer divorces among the Toucouleur is due to both their polygamous tradition and the husband's retaining the children. A number of Bidan

respondents, as a matter of fact, felt that if the women would give the children to their husbands, the men would not divorce them so easily.

> "When a woman divorces, she should give the child to her husband and he will see what there is to do. Some say that if they do this, the men will no longer have time to get dressed up, etc...Elsewhere in the world there are kindergartens, but in Mauritania the women who act as kindergartens for the men." (2 - UB)

> "Men like their children only when they are with their mother." (1 - LB)

There is tremendous stress on the divorced Bidan women. There are no goverrment agencies offering financial and moral assistance. The woman must resort to handouts from her family. Some of these women have resorted to selling jewelry and knick-knacks and only just manage to survive. Furthermore, since it is not in their tradition, nor is it traditionally accepted behaviour for women to sell, then they suffer the additional injury of being badly thought of.

> "Women of good families shouldn't work, only stay (home) and drink milk." (2 - UB)

Other women resort to prostitution.

> "My daughter (also divorced) and I have kept our dignity. Some start prostituting." (1 - LB)

It is unfortunate that the military coup d'etat (July 1978) completely stopped the slow progress that had been made toward divorce reform. The government of Moktar ould Daddah recognized

these problems and the women's groups it supported were actively calling for change before the coup. It is difficult at this time to determine the new government's stand on the matter, but at the time of writing, all hope has been extinguished among the women.

F. Old Age

Old age in Mauritania does not pose the same problems as in a western society. Essentially, wherever the extended family exists, the old are accepted, respected and willingly cared for. Perhaps the only drawback is that wherever the extended family exists, not that many people arrive at 'old age', so the problem is on a much smaller scale than in the industrialized west.

In Mauritanian society, with its very strong tradition of hospitality and philanthropy, an old person will never be abandoned, at least not in an encampment, village or small town.

> "It is rare to find an old person abandoned here. He always has a family." (16 - UB)

There exists in Mauritania an official system of social security which provides for retirement; however,this benefits only those who have worked, primarily the male functionaries and cadres.

Unfortunately, due to the brevity of this study, not enough old women were interviewed. It appears that this is an area that warrants further research, as this group was one of those

most affected by the drought and the recent migrations to the larger towns and villages.

The two old women interviewed in the study live in a fairly comfortable and secure situation, either with their children or another member of their family. One worked as an artisan making cushions, the other had never worked in her life. They both seemed to lack little and seemed satisfied with their lives.

None of the respondents said that they had been concerned about old age, nor had they made any preparations for their old age when they were younger.

> "I don't worry about that. One can always count on the family or the neighbors." (16 - UB)

The old women, like their younger counterparts, recognize that they cannot confidently count on men for aid, at least not on husbands. They do, however, count heavily on their children and this was one reason for which to have children.

> "It offers security to have children - to take care of you when old." (16 - UB)

It is interesting to add that many of the other informants agreed with this and even voiced some preference for having daughters rather than sons because daughters took better care of their mothers.

> "Daughters look after their mothers more than sons. I prefer to have daughters." (3 - Group)

In regards to old age, there does not appear to be that much difference between the Bidans and other ethnic groups as all seemingly tend to respect and care for their old.

II. OCCUPATION

Whether Bidan or black, the women of Mauritania have always worked within the framework of their homes and immediate surroundings. They have never had any choices or alternatives in the work that they did. As in every other aspect of their lives, they did not have that much control over their destinies. This, is changing to some extent, as more girls are going to school and more and more women are recognizing that they can work and earn money. Before, this realization was only for the artisans and even they had no choice in their destiny, they simply followed in their mother's footsteps.

Traditionally, the Bidan woman's work was well defined and the amount of actual activity depended on how well off she was. All Bidan women, as we have seen in an earlier section, learn how to take care of the tent, as well as packing, housekeeping, how to make the straw mats, and if they are artisans, they learn their mother's trade as well. If the woman is rich, she will have servants and she will only have to manage and supervise the activities of others.

> "My mother (wife of a tribal chief) had slaves, ironsmiths, etc. She fed more than 200 people. She was the wife of the tribal chief. She hired people and gave orders. She managed the women in the encampment and her husband the men. There was someone to kill the animals, bring the milk, she lacked nothing." (2 - UB)

> "I install the mats, make the enclosure for the tent. The woman's work is the tent, the mats and to take care of the children." (9 - MB)

> "My mother was very meritorious. She was more active than I. She did the tent, wove the linen, made the mats, looked after the animals, learned the Koran..." (3 - Group)

> "Women do all in the tent - the tent, the mats, cushions, blankets, everything is made by the women." (4 - MB)

In addition to her normal duties in the tent, the artisans living in the desert would also make the mats and cushions and carpets to sell.

> "The women in the desert gives her mats or the carpets to her husband for him to sell in the village." (4)

For the other ethnic groups of the south, their duties are also centered around the upkeep and running of the house and children. In addition, they may have gardens for their own consumption and/or to sell in the market for extra money. These women seem to be particularly industrious and their activities and potential definitely warrant further study.

All of the women, except one (an old Bidan), had some occupation. Two of the wealthy Bidans were housewives who supervised the running of their homes/tent. The remaining 13 respondents had a fixed, money-earning occupation of some sort.

Nearly all of the women had a very positive outlook towards women who worked. They felt that while perhaps ideally they would like to be in a situation where they were not

obliged to work, i.e. married to someone very rich, they do appreciate their feeling of independence which their work provides them.

> "I've known for a long time that I should work and be independent and not count on my husband." (1 - LB)
>
> "I want to work, to be independent economically and to aid my parents." (3 - Group)

This is especially true of the artisans who have been conditioned all their lives to work.

> "The woman who works is better than the woman who doesn't work. She is independent. If she receives something from her husband it is good, if not, she has her own money." (14 - LB)

This is especially interesting when considering the situation of many Bidan women now filling the work force, as traditionally a Bidan was considered 'above' working. There has been an enforced change in the values that were once held dear. Several of the Bidans who sell mentioned that their mothers would never have considered selling and one woman even felt this influence so strongly that she waited until her mother's death before she started selling.

> "She (mother) never sold anything... In those days, it was ugly to see a man sell and even worse to see a woman sell." (2 - UB)
>
> "My mother did not earn her living selling. For her, it was not well thought of to sell." (1 - LB)

There is some evidence to indicate that Mauritanian men, especially Bidan, are perhaps not that eager for their wives to work. The traditional values of the wife staying home ("sitting under the tent and drinking milk") and just being something of an ornament are perhaps harder for the men to relinquish than the women.

> "Men are always jealous of their sovereignty. If he married a girl in school, the first thing he did was take her out of school. The men hope that the wife will not travel, not sell, just stay at home." (2 - UB)

At this point in the report, it seems worthwhile to give a brief outline of some of the occupations practiced by the informants, excepting however, the cadres.

A. Woman Selling Jewelry

This informant sells old jewelry, some plastic items like combs and balls, knick-knacks and some articles used to decorate the hair. She sells these at a small, low table, as she sits on the ground. She buys all of her merchandise in Nouakchott, although there are some women who make regular trips into the interior looking for old jewelry to buy.

In the past few years, the number of women like this informant has increased rapidly in Nouakchott. It would appear that many are like her, being divorced and trying to earn some livelihood for herself and her children.

Many of them are also relatively new to Nouakchott, having

come from the interior within the past 5 years.

> "Before the drought, I was with my family and lacked nothing." (1 - LB)

B. Woman Selling Voiles (the attire of the Bidan)

Like the woman selling jewelry, this respondent came to Nouakchott five years ago in order to be with her children going to school in the capital.

> "I had children going to school and I came to Nouakchott to send them to school. When the children were accepted to the older class, my husband sold the animals, came to buy a house and then we all came." (2 - UB)

This respondent started her business and became very successful. Before the recent fire in the Nouakchott central market, she had several stalls selling voiles in which men from her tribe worked for a salary.

> "I paid them 3000 UM a month plus food. My employees chose that system." (2 - UB)

This informant manages her business herself. Her husband has his own affairs and they do not mix the two. She also travels to Senegal, Morocco and Mecca to buy her merchandise.

The recent fire that destroyed the central market area badly affected the business of this informant, the woman selling jewelry and the informant selling vegetables, plus of course, all the other women like them selling products there. All were forced to resettle in other market areas that are not as

centrally located and do not cater to the bourgeoisie of Nouakchott.

It is this informant's theory that the fire was an intentional result of the large businessmen of Nouakchott wanting to disperse with the competition which the women merchants presented.

> "The clients of the 5th arrondissement are different - they don't have much to eat. The clients diminished. The debts of the old clients are still at the capital (Nouakchott). The big businessmen said the bourgeoisie should stay and the others should got to the 5th. It is very bad for the women and was expressly against the women." (2 - UB)

C. Growing and Selling Vegetables

This woman is a Haratin (freed slave) who grabbed the opportunity to buy a small plot of land from the government with the intention of growing and selling her own vegetables. She bought the land for 60,000 UM, paying a down payment plus 4000 UM installments over an 8 year period.

> "Before I had a garden, but it wasn't given officially. I tried to get money when it was officially announced that the government was selling land." (11 - H)

The idea to buy the land was hers, although her husband helped her to pay the first installment and handle the paperwork.

She employes a man to work the land and cultivate the vegetables and then she and her daughter sell them in the market. Out of her earnings, she pays her employee (2300 UM plus food)

and she buys all her materials and seeds.

> "I pay all the fertilizers, the materials, rakes, cutters, hoes. Every month we must put fertilizer and insecticides." (11 - H)

If she has a profit, she will buy more material. There is sometimes a loss and wastage.

> "When it is cold, there are lots of vegetables and some are left over. Now (spring) there are not enough and sell all." (11 - H)

This informant was also very much affected by the market fire, as she is now forced to sell her vegetables in an out-of-the-way location.

D. Leatherworkers

Unlike the occupations above, the women leatherworkers are artisans who have learned their trade from their mothers and grandmothers. One of the informants was quite old and was teaching her granddaughter to decorate leather, as her own daughter had little interest in the trade today. The artisans have passed their childhood observing and learning and knowing what the future held in store for them.

> "When I was young, I worked for my mother and after my marriage I worked for myself." (14 - LB)

Two of the women involved in the study are leather artisans. The make cushions, pipe and tobacco holders, leather key rings, "tassouvra" (very big leather sacks used for transporting clothing

and household linens on camels), straw and leather mats and miniature saddles and tents which are used to teach young girls how to pack and move the encampment.

The artisans are trained how to select and treat the hides, how to decorate the hides with dyes and inks, and how to sew the skins.

> "Sometimes I tan it myself. I take the hairs off and whiten the hide with sour milk and let it dry in the sun." (4 - MB)

Normally they sell their products to the women who sell jewelry in the market, for resale. They also work frequently by special order. On the whole, the artisans seemed quite content with their occupations and the fact that they have an occupation which provides them with pride in their work, assurance of a living and their independence.

> "I make something pretty. I prefer to work and make my money and not have to ask others. I have always done that. No other choices. I have always earned my living doing that." (14 - LB)

Artisans stay within the "forgeron" class when marrying. Their husbands will make articles such as knives and needles that the women use in working the leather. Most of the husbands also make jewelry from silver and gold.

E. Fabric Dyer

This informant also started dying fabric during her youth, after learning the trade from her mother.

"My mother was a dyer and so was my grandmother." (12 - T)

She only dyes the fabric. Other people bring her the fabric to dye, so her material outlays are for the colour powders and the two employees who work for her.

"I pay one 2000 UM and the other 3000 UM per month, plus their food." (12 - T)

Apparently this informant is quite artistic and has started many fashions with her designs.

F. Couscous Maker

This respondent is a slave who was not freed but who revolted and no longer lives with her master. Of all the occupations present here, hers is the most precarious and her life and living conditions are the most dismal. She lives in an enclosure in Nouakchott in which there are four to five other tents, all of which belong to women like herself, trying to earn enough money selling couscous to feed themselves and their children. Some of the women are forced to prostitute themselves.

The informant buys her own materials for the couscous: the flour, charcoal, baobab tree leaves, ("...it gives a certain taste and permits the grain to absorb the sauce." (13 - A)), the crushed wheat and water. She then sifts the wheat and mixes it with the flour and water until it forms the little balls of couscous. She sells her couscous wherever she can; sometimes on a sidewalk, sometimes in the market and sometimes door to door.

Apparently it is very difficult to sell because of competition and the popularity of rice, and most of the time she sells nothing.

> "It is very rare that I manage to sell my couscous. Most of the time, I sell nothings and I come back and dry it and put it in a sack and then we can eat it when we go in the desert." (13 - A)

III. ECONOMIC ROLE

It is difficult to draw many conclusions at this early stage of research regarding the economic role of women.

Ideally, women in Mauritania have the right to manage their own property and affairs. Realistically, however, it is difficult at this stage of research to determine the extent of this freedom. One of the respondents living in the desert felt obliged to consult her father and/or husband before selling one of her animals, for example.

> "I ask my husband or father if I want to sell an animal. A woman cannot administer something without her husband or father." (9 - MB)

Another respondent who worked, administered and managed her own property, her animals and her business affairs herself and she did not feel obliged to ask her husband at all for his permission to sell something, although she would probably discuss the matter with him beforehand. She paid the shepards salary out of her own money.

> "I have three camels about 5 kilometers from here. I have a guardian and an old slave to look after them." (2 - UB)

It would appear that even though the women may have a degree of financial independence, they still discuss important matters with their husbands, especially when those matters

regard them as a family unit.

Among the informants who did not work, none seemed to have particular problems in obtaining money from their husbands. The two housewives lived in comfortable surroundings and indicated that whenever they needed money they had merely to ask.

> "My husband gives me money, also my father. I buy what I want - clothes for the children and myself and jewelry." (9 - MB)

Most of the women assumed that women who work were more independent and in an ideal situation. One of the housewives felt that working women would no longer be obliged to answer to their husbands.

> "If a woman earns her salary, the man can no longer command the woman." (9 - MB)

However, when talking with the working women, it was apparent that the majority shared their profits/salary with their husbands either on a regular basis or by some sharing of the household expenses.

> "We have a joint bank account at the bank." (7 - T)

> "What he earns is little. If we don't put it together, we won't succeed. Sometimes he doesn't have enough and I pay. We put it together." (11 - H)

The woman who sells voiles, however, felt that it was an advantage to have one's money separate and be independent, and she never pooled her profits. When her husband had no money,

she would pay for things that were normally his responsibility.

> "We have our profits separately. It's already good to have one's money separate. Sometimes he asks for money and I won't give it to him...Sometimes, if my husband doesn't have money, I pay." (2 - UB)

In addition, the informant who dyes fabric adamantly refuses to give money to her husband, although she said that he never asks, and one felt that this was due to the fact that he had two wives.

Even if they may not put their money into the hands of their husband, all of the women who work share the household responsibilities to varying degrees.

The informant selling voiles has her own car and chauffeur, pays for the upkeep of her animals, gives money to the dhildren when they ask and restocks the refrigerator if she sees it empty.

> "My husband takes care of all the household expenses. He buys the food, but I may buy the food also if I see that the refrigerator is empty... He automatically buys the tea. Sometimes he buys the children's books and supplies and sometimes I buy." (2 - UB)

Some of the women buy clothes and jewelry with their money, while their husbands buy the food. This may be due to the regularity of the husbands salary, especially in the case of the artisans and merchants. Several of the women also send money to their families.

"I buy jewelry, clothes and the dyes. This is his house and he buys the food." (12 - T)

"When I sell a carpet, I buy the clothes and food and I built a room onto our house." (10 - LB)

"I pay the maid and he pays the houseboy. He pays for the food and I buy little things that are needed. He buys the big things. He pays for the clothes, the teachers and the books. I send money home." (7 - T)

IV. DECISION MAKING POWERS

A. Family Level

A young Mauritanian girl cannot hope to decide anything regarding her life until she is married. Her parents, generally her father, decides whether or not she receives an education, whether or not she is force fed and whom she marries. After their first divorce, the girls can then decide for themselves, or at least be consulted upon the choice of their next marriage partner. Often, however, they are so restricted by values that they are reluctant to object for fear of showing disrespect on insult to their parents.

It is with regards to their husbands that Mauritanian women first get a taste of their decision making powers. They are, however, so conditioned by this time to respecting male authority that they tend to exercise their powers on a very limited basis, either with regards to insignificant details or in manipulative ways such as not sleeping with their husbands until he changes his mind or gives his wife what she wants. At childbirth, for example, there is a belief that women can retain labor while their husbands, masters or mistresses can be manipulated into providing favors and gifts in coaxing the mother to give birth.

> "If a woman get angry, she won't sleep with him until he gives her what she wants." (9 - MB)

All of the women recognize that in Mauritania, women are normally obliged to consult their husbands or fathers before making a major decision.

> "You cannot do anything without notifying your husband or father." (9 - MB)

> "Here in Mauritania, the general rule is that you must always ask the opinion of the husband even though there are women with a certain personality who work more than the men." (11 - H)

Many of the women will not ask their husbands judgement or opinion when it concerns something unimportant such as selling or buying something small. Minor issues regarding the running of the household are also left up to the women.

> "The things not interesting one can do without asking, like sewing, making the tent and the mats. The important things are the marriage and deciding to sell something." (9 - MB)

> "The things that have no value, I do not ask. Bigger things, I ask." (5 - UB)

> "All over Mauritania, decisions regarding the house and servants are always for the wife. The general management is for the husband, like when to buy something. And big decisions like to buy land and the education of the children, that's the husband. I can give my advise, but it is the husband who takes the decision." (2 - UB)

The children's education and the marriage of a daughter are considered very important issues that are always left up to the father, even when the parents are divorced.

> "If I want to marry my daughter, I must have the OK of her father." (8 - LB)

"If her father accepts, I want her to finish her studies." (9 - MB)

B. Work Level

With regards to their work, women do not ask their husbands participation in their decisions. Some may consult their husbands, but the general rule seems to be a separation of decision making powers between work and family.

C. National Level

At the national level, women now have no participation in the decision making powers. Before the military coup d'etat in July 1978, they had some voice, as there was a woman minister, women were active in the political party (Parti du Peuple Mauritanienne) and women were represented in government delegations and conferences.

V. ATTITUDES AND VALUES

A. Husbands and Men in General

One of the questions asked of all the respondents was whether at any time in their lives, they wished they had been born a boy. The majority responded with a resounding yes because being a boy represents having choices and being able to control one's destiny, which as women, they felt they could not. Some of the women had wished they were born a boy when they were quite young, when their movements were restricted moreso than their brother's or cousin's. From around the onset of puberty, young girls are restricted to their homes and can no longer play and have the freedom afforded their brothers.

> "The greatest misfortune is to be born a girl in Mauritania and in the third world. There is social inegality and all the problems. Everything is forbidden...around 14 years of age they start to make the difference." (6 - UB)

> "When I was around 10 years old... I couldn't go out at night to play. My brothers could go, but not me." (7 - T)

Others felt that being born a boy would present freedoms to marry or not marry and to whom they wished, as well as a greater facility to work and earn a living.

> "If I was a boy, I would have more chance to earn a living. I would have the first decision in marriage and divorce. I wouldn't be afraid to have illegitimate children." (1 - LB)

> "I have wished to be a boy so that I wouldn't have to be married." (9 - MB)

Many of the women have a rather irreverent and even sometimes contemptuous attitude towards men. They feel put down and kept down by men. They recognize that men hold them in very low esteem and only want them for physical contact. Many also feel that men are jealous of any advancement made by women and rigidly conservative in their opinion of women.

> "Men do not respect women. Men want to colonize women. They don't want women to get to school. They want them to stay ignorant. For men, women are like mattresses." (8 - LB)

> "Women are more open minded than men." (6 - UB)

B. Daughters

All of the respondents wish for a better life for their daughters and their granddaughters. Nearly all wanted their daughters to finish school (at least high school level) before marrying and be able to have more financial independence than they themselves have. They want them to have more of a voice in the choice of husband.

> "I hope that she (granddaughter) has the chance to go to school and marry someone understanding...I wanted my daughter's life to be different. I have known for a long time that I should work and be independent and not count on a husband. As a result, I wanted my daughter to go to school at a young age, but my mother didn't want it." (1 - LB)

"I wouldn't accept it if my daughter wanted to marry before she finished her studies. I want her to do something the women in Mauritania haven't done - like be an engineer or a doctor. I want her to be special, to speak of her." (7 - T)

Another question that was asked of all the informants was how their life was different from their mother's and from their daughter's. These responses revealed the many changes that had taken place in their lives and in their expectations as women. Many of them had recently moved to Nouakchott (within the past 5-8 years) and changed their lifestyle with both positive and negative feelings. There is obviously some conflict of values between what the older generation learned to expect and value in life and the present day practices of their daughters.

"I lived with my mother in the desert. My daughter was born in a village. She wants to go out, to learn, not to wear the indigo..." (1 - LB)

"For me, I wanted my hair braided with lots of jewelry and wash once a month, after the period. My daughter showers every 2 or 3 days. She wants to be quick, to walk quickly and this is ugly. A woman should walk slowly...My daughter prefers to move house by car and I am nostalgic to move by camel." (4 - MB)

The young informants all recognized their increased independence and freedom of movement.

"My mother stays in and sees no one, but I go out and see who I want." (3 - Group)

> "My mother was force fed. She just stays in. I want to work, be independent and aid my family." (3 - Group)

> "My mother wouldn't travel, except to go to Mecca. She isn't interested in decoration (home), to clean, to organize the house. I have traveled and seen other things. I have new ideas for my home, new things to cook." (5 - UB)

> "Our ideals are different. For my mother, the ideal is to marry and stay home. For me it is having a role to play outside of the house. To be a citizen who has a political role to play." (6 - UB)

In addition to basic practices, there is fear expressed by some informants that their daughters will not retain those moral values held dear.

> "That she continues to have certain good Mauritanian traditions - to be charitable, wear long dresses and cover herself, guard her honor, not to go to certain places, not to see certain films." (2 - UB)

> "With my counsel, my daughter does keep certain values...I don't want her to go with 'bad men' - the rest (values) I don't care about." (1 - LB)

There is an acute fear of their daughters having illegitimate babies and when this arises, irrevocable shame is brought on the family. This fear seems so intense that perhaps one reason why many mothers are so anxious for their daughters to marry early is that the mothers can then relax and have some peace of mind. The restrictions placed on a young girl's movements at

14 years of age is essentially out of such fear. A couple of mothers even admitted telling their daughters deliberate lies concerning the origins of babies, such as that they come from touching the arm of a man, in order to install sufficient fear in their daughters.

> "From a certain age, we are watched over-so much so. Parents are afraid they will be dishonored." (young high school student)
>
> "Since birth, I teach them about men. They are afraid of men and told that they can get pregnant very easily." (a mother of 3 daughters)
>
> "I tell her not to speak with men, not to sit next to men." (a mother of a high school student)

The mothers do not have that much confidence in their daughter's judgement or discrimination nor in their ability to cope with men. They assume that their daughters will immediately fall prey to immoral and wicked men as soon as they are away from their mother's watchful eye.

> "I am afraid someone will oblige her, play on her morals." (mother of high school student)
>
> "I do not want her to sleep with someone. It is a disgrace for the parents. It affirms that the parents did not take enough responsibility to look after her." (5 - UB)

C. Education

Nearly every informant regarded education as important for girls, as the only means to have economic independence and to better herself and her condition in life.

> "It is important for women to go to school. She stands for nothing. She doesn't have any value. If you don't read, don't write, you cannot work." (8 - LB)
>
> "The daughters should learn and develop." (9 - MB)
>
> "The girl who studies can work and have an improvement." (11 - H)

It is difficult to tell at this early stage of research whether it is the mother more than the father who encourages their daughter to go to school and to stay in school. Almost all of the respondents recognize the importance of education for girls, but there were a few women sitting on the sidelines and some remarks were made by the informants when speaking of their own childhood which indicated that it is actually sometimes the father who pushes the daughter more to go to school. In other cases, it is the contrary.

> "He feels that girls should go to school more than boys. They are biologically weaker than boys so they should study and work intellectually. Boys not in school can always use their muscles to be a mason, etc., but not girls. It does not destroy the finesse and beauty of women to go to school." (2 - UB)

"My mother refused that we go to school. It was my father who insisted. My father has a special mentality. He feels that women are equal to men and should be independent. We should not count on him or on a husband." (6 - UB)

One must not forget, however, that women are not masters of their own life. They cannot determine the course of their life and very few, if any choices are open to them. If they have the chance to go to school and even to lycee, their alternatives are still very limited. There is only the Ecole Normal d'Instituteur in Mauritania. Only in very rare cases are they allowed to go outside of the country to study, unless they are married.

Many young girls in high school would like to study medicine, law or engineering and they would probably have very good chances to obtain scholarships. The problem arises, however, with their parents, who are terribly afraid the minute their daughters are out of the house, that they would never let their daughters go abroad to university.

"I want to study medicine abroad. Parents only accept their daughters going to school abroad if they are married. I hope I can convince my parents." (3 - Group)

Even a mother, who has traveled widely, is very bourgeoise and a trend setter, spoke with much conviction about the importance of education for girls but would not let her daughter leave to study abroad.

"I am not in agreement that she leaves when she is single." (5 - UB)

Only one of the mothers interviewed said that she would let her daughter go abroad alone for study.

> "I am prepared to let my daughter leave the country alone." (7 - T)

Without any change in these attitudes, there is no way that the young women of Mauritania can fill their expectations and those needed in the development of the country

D. Forced Feeding ("Gavage")

A Bidan proverbe says "To be a woman of quality, it is necessary to be a woman of quantity".

Force feeding of young girls is a Bidan custom that was practiced widely but now seems to be diminishing, especially in the cities and towns of Mauritania. Slaves were never force fed, nor did the Toucouleur or Wolofs practice this custom.

Young Bidan girls are fattened from around the age of 6 or 7 years old. They are given approximately 20 litres of milk a day to drink, and if they resist, they are pinched, hit and to varying degrees tortured until they drink their milk.

Perhaps the most interesting informant of the study was a very large woman, the daughter of a tribal chief, who gave a fascinating explanation of the differences between cows milk and camels milk when force feeding. This woman grew up in Chinguetti, an oasis village in the north, and according to her, the daughters of good families were only given camels milk. Cows milk and sheeps milk were for the lower castes, since

camels cost more and are considered more aristocratic. The advantages of camels milk are many.

> "Camel's milk gives a pretty color to the skin. Woman are lighter when fed with camel's milk. Camels are more resistant and stronger than other animals, therefore, their milk is better. It contains vitamins because the women who drink the milk have a pretty color and their hair is pretty. It is less fatty and the skin of others who drink cow's milk is always greasier. Also women who drink camel's milk have small stomachs, because it is easier to digest." (2 - UB)

The theories behind this custom and its origins are many. Firstly, in Mauritania, the traditional aesthetic ideal is a large, fat woman, the stouter the better.

> "A big woman is prettier.." (6 - UB)

This ideal can be due to the fact that fatness indicates wealth and all the accompanying images attributed to the men who have fat wives - pride, wealth, etc. It can also be due to the fact that men themselves prefer women who are fat and they perpetuate this ideal. Most of the women tend to think the latter, that men prefer their women fat.

> "Men are like dogs, they only like meat." (1 - LB)

To be force fed then becomes something that one must endure in order to attract a husband.

> "It's a duty one is obliged to do in order to find a husband." (1 - LB)

This leads to another theory commonly accepted, namely that young girls are force fed from an early age so that they will "grow up quickly" and then be married off even sooner. This is quite attractive to many parents as the dowery which they receive can be quite substantial.* It is certain that a large, fat Bidan of 14 years old looks older than her thin contemporary. She not only looks older, but some women actually believe that she grows faster and becomes a women, i.e. starts menstruating, sooner.

> "To grow up quickly to be sold - men like their women fat." (8 - LB)

> "Women who are force fed become grown earlier. The menstruation comes earlier." (2 - UB)

When a young girl was being force fed, she could not go to school. Eventually she could do nothing but lay in her tent. Even now, those women informants who were force fed when young recognize, with sadness, their difficulty to move, their shortness of breath and their assorted medical problems (difficult pregnancies and labors, hypertension, etc.).

> "I did not do that for my daughter. I know what it is like for me - slow, fat. I see fat women and I am sad because I know that they suffer." (1 - LB)

The number of girls being force fed now has diminished extensively. It is difficult to know at this early stage of

* (c.f. CHAAB No. 65, 14 September 1975, p. 3)

research exactly what is happening in the desert, however, customs have changed, even there, and the drought killed many of the animals. Not that many families living in the desert have enough money and animals to force feed a daughter properly.

Furthermore, since the independence of Mauritania and the progress made towards the emancipation of women, attitudes themselves have changed. Women are no longer willing to accept the passivity that being force fed assures. Styles are changing also and some women feel that men's tastes have changed accordingly.* For the most part, however, it would seem that force feeding has diminished because of a greater emphasis on education for girls, changing life styles from the desert bush to the towns and villages, and less acceptance of women to perpetuate an enforced, passive, non-productive state.

> "The girls of this time do not want to be fat." (4 - MB)
>
> "I would rather that my daughter learn than be force fed." (4 - MB)
>
> "Now it is finished. The women are against that. There is no more milk, the cows are dead...the people here liked to have it done for their daughters but they don't find anyone to do it anymore. The young men don't like it any more. The women, if they are fat, they can no longer do anything. The young now want a wife to work and take care of the house." (9 - MB)

* (c.f. CHAAB No. 2, 2 July 1975, p. 5)

E. Polygamy

Polygamy is practiced primarily among the Toucouleur, Wolofs and Sarakólle of Mauritania rather than by the Haratin or Bidans. Essentially, the Moors have their successive marriages and the others have polygamy.

It is difficult at this early stage of research to determine the reasons for this clear division.

Among the non-Moors there appears to be some change, and somewhat fewer women are willing to accept a polygamous marriage. The problem arises, especially, when they are married and not told beforehand of the existence of another wife.

> "Sometimes she is not consulted and it's after the marriage that she is informed. He is obliged to give a gift because she is so angry." (7 - T)

Polygamy is associated by Bidan women with oppression. When comparing themselves with other nationalities and other groups, Bidan women cite the existence of polygamy as a major factor in the oppression of black women. It would appear that Bidans enjoy a falsy sense of security in their own marriages, and yet they assume themselves to be superior to and more liberated than the black and Moroccan counterparts who "accept" polygamy.

> "Arabs never practiced much polygamy. Women prefer not to marry and be poor than to marry a rich man who has other wives." (2 - UB)

"The Negresses begin to refuse to accept polygamy. Women are starting to fight polygamy." (7 - T)

While the majority of Bidan women keep their children when they are divorced, the Toucouleur women are obliged to give their children to her co-wife if she does not accept polygamy.

F. Women's Role in Mauritania

Mauritanian women are rightly considered as among the most independent of traditional Muslim women, and they are often less materially dependent upon their husbands than their counterparts in industrialized societies. They are adaptable and flexible and can leave a life in the desert resembling the middle ages and yet come to Nouakchott, learn to drive a car and perhaps even start a business.

"Mauritanian women are very smart and assimilate very easily and change their mentality very quickly." (2 - UB)

In comparison, the women of Saudi Arabia and Morocco are seen as being more oppressed and less politically aware than the women of Mauritania.

Until the military coup d'etat in July 1978, women had an active and rather hearty voice in the government and in the decisions of the country. The wife of the President Moktar ould Daddah was a political activist who, with her husband's full support, encouraged the formation of an active woman's

movement and the full participation of women in the national party (PPM). Until the coup d'etat, there was a woman minister (Minister of Social Affairs and the Protection of the Family), a woman was always present in the delegations to the United Nations and women were always represented in official visits and conferences.

From the time of independence (1960) until the coup d'etat, much progress had been made affecting women, economically, politically and intellectually. Industries were created expressly for women; centers of formation teaching sewing, knitting, etc. were formed; more schools were built; and the attendance of girls was actively encouraged.* Laws had been written (but not yet passed) concerning the marriage contract and the age of marriage, and the number of women filling the positions of cadres had increased yearly.

> "A movement for women only existed after independence. If there wasn't that, I wouldn't be here selling fabric." (2 - UB)

However, since most of the activities concerning the women's movement (lead by the Conseil Superieur des Femmes) were politically oriented and solidly associated with the PPM, all the activities totally ended in July 1978. None of the women's organizations continue at this time and it is doubtful that there exists even a clandestine movement.

* (c.f. Abderrahame ould Hamza, "La Condition de la Femme Mauritanienne en Evolution", 1971)

It should be noted that there was some resentment towards Madame ould Daddah and the women's movement by Mauritanian men. They objected to the political voice and power that she held and the threat the movement posed to their sovereignty.

There were also women who resented Mme. ould Daddah because she was a Frenchwoman assuming the role of a Bidan. They did feel gratitude towards the work she accomplished. Some of the informants expressed some resentment towards the women's movement, per se. Their chief complaint was that the movement was led and controlled by a handful of women who were very active politically, always in the news and always taking advantage of trips abroad and not really in tune with their needs. One informant believed that there was some mismanagement of funds and self profitering by the movement's leaders. Some doubt was expressed that the movement touched the women at the grassroots level.

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One area that would be of interest in later research is exactly the influence that the women's movements played on the women in Mauritania and whether they are that open to political influence. Unfortunately, in this study only scant attention was given to the effects the CSF (Conseil Superieur des Femmes) and the PPM had on women throughout the country. However, it would seem that there was a small group of very active women who were always in the news and who were assuming the majority voice, and one wonders what the women in the villages and in the desert felt about them.

SOME STANDARD QUESTIONS ASKED OF ALL THE INFORMANTS

1. How is your life different from your mother's? from your grandmother's?
2. How is your life different from your daughter's?
3. If you had the power, or the choice, how would you like your daughter's life to be different from your own?
4. Was there any time in your life, as a child or even now, when you said to yourself, "I wish I had been born a boy"?
5. Who influenced you most in your childhood?
6. What did your mother teach you and what did your father teach you?
7. What do you think about education for girls?
8. How much do you spend a week and on what?
9. Do you decide what is spent in the family budget?
10. Do you have an active role in the decision-making process or is it just a veto power?
11. In what areas do you ask advice from men?
12. Is there any difference between women who work and women who do not work and their decision-making power?
13. What differences do you perceive between yourself and western women? Moroccan women? Saudi Arabian women? Senegalese women?

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* These numbers correspond with the bibliography in the attached annex.